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Pericles and the Challenge of Democratic Leadership

Book review by Kostas A. Lavdas

Book: "Pericles of Athens", by Vincent Azoulay
Translated by Janet Lloyd, Foreword by Paul Cartledge

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Vincent Azoulay's new book, originally published in France by Armand Colin in 2011, brings much that is fresh and innovative in a rather crowded field. Of great interest to political scientists, political theorists, and international relations specialists, this masterly translation of Azoulay's eloquent text is inviting as it is intellectually stimulating. The foreword to the English edition by Paul Cartledge does an admirable job in placing Azoulay's *Pericles* in context. To start with, the main contribution of the book is to

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propose a fresher look at Pericles as a statesman in the "model" regime of classical, Athenian direct democracy.

The name of Pericles conjures up the spirit of classical Athenian democracy; but it also reminds us of the beginning of the great Peloponnesian War that resulted in the demise of Athens. These two facets – the sophistication of the Athenian demos and the destruction brought about by a ruthless, prolonged, large-scale war – converge in the monumental Periclean Funeral Oration, at least the version Thucydides left us. In the Funeral Oration, Pericles developed some of the most emblematic themes of classical democracy. It proposed – in W. Robert Connor's words – the idea of "a festival society in which the individual is not subdued to the good of the herd, but becomes a concelebrator renewed in his efforts by his participation in society". Unavoidably, however, much of the writing on Pericles has concerned – directly or indirectly – his contribution to the Great War. The "rational" pursuit of power by city-states, the competing entities of the international system of the ancient world, never failed to excite realist and neo-realist readers. Indeed, by the 1970s, readings of Thucydides had become an indispensable element of the canon of international relations theory and analysis. Echoing the views of many, Robert Gilpin argued in 1984 that Thucydides is "the first scientific student of international politics".

Still, as I have argued elsewhere, the tradition which has marked out Thucydides as the first systematic exponent of the role of power politics in international relations should not lead us to erect an impassable barrier between this approach to international interaction and approaches that wish to explore other dimensions and parameters. This becomes evident if we consider the fact that Thucydides himself did not appear interested in erecting such barriers. Not just power games but also the roles of bounded rationality, of norms and normative change, and of irrational behaviour in leaders and followers alike are crucial in the monumental *History of the Peloponnesian War*. As scholars have begun to recognize for some time, norms play important roles in Thucydides and his History. But unlike the pursuit of power, normative behaviour changes over time. This certainly applies to international norms.

Pericles was an imperialist and, as Azoulay writes, was probably the first to try to theorize the need for Athenian imperialism and to advance a sophisticated legitimacy basis for its moderate version. He was keen to ensure that the people responsible for running the empire were passing on to the *demos* the profits that resulted from the exploitation of the empire's resources. When the great war against Sparta and her allies erupted, Pericles was still at the helm (albeit he died soon thereafter from the plague). To what extent was Pericles responsible for the strategy of self-restraint and reliance on Athens' unsurpassed naval power, a strategy that served the Athenians well during the early years of the Peloponnesian War? To be sure, the role of demagogues (such as Cleon) was a major factor in Athenian politics and its weight increased sharply after the death of Pericles in the still early phase of the great war. It appears that both Sparta and Athens manifested at first a certain reluctance to move to war. The moderately bellicose approach sustained by Pericles, who was exceedingly influential in Athens at the time, is generally accepted by most scholars (including Azoulay) to have been a significant factor in the years leading to the war. At the same time, the notion that Pericles was an expansionist has been disputed with rigour: Donald Kagan has shown that a Periclean grand strategy, if ever there was one, was to consolidate the Athenian empire by limiting it to a defensible size and by maintaining peace with the two main rivals, Sparta and Persia.

At any rate, the forces of long-term, consistent strategizing that combined self-restraint and a long-term view of relationships became weaker after the death of Pericles. The clear, calculating and at the same moderate Periclean strategy in the early years of conflict was to be sorely missed by the Athenians. When Sparta invaded Attica, soon after the war broke out, Pericles set in motion a systematic plan of restraint and steadiness, favouring a prolonged conflict that would avoid a major land battle, guarantee continued command of the seas, and ultimately send a message to Sparta that the war was leading

nowhere. As Kagan and others have argued, the eventual failure of that strategy after Pericles had died, the plague broke out, Cleon the demagogue gained in influence, Sparta approached Persia, and Athens decided to embark on the Sicilian expedition in a classic example of imperial over-extension, cannot eclipse the strategy's brilliance and potential for success.

Two features strike us as central to Azoulay's book: his attempt to place the study of Pericles in historical and interpretive context; and his systematic effort to distance his work from the hagiography of Pericles (that emerged in the 19th century and became dominant in much of the 20th) without necessarily wishing to relativize the Athenians' role and significance.

Rich in biographical detail, drawn mainly from Thucydides and Plutarch (as Azoulay reminds us, epigraphical and archaeological sources are not particularly useful for a detailed account of the Athenian statesman's life), the book offers a fascinating narrative mixed with sharp argumentation and the discussion of various historical hypotheses. Chapters 11 and 12 offer a very useful account of the perceptions of and views on Pericles as a statesman from the 15th to the 21st centuries, beginning with the relative downgrading of Pericles in early modernity and culminating in his apotheosis as an archetypal democrat in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the long term, Pericle's reputation and the assessment of his contribution to Athenian democracy and the Western political tradition followed the evolving trends and trajectories prevalent in different epochs. As Azoulay notes, while from the Renaissance to the beginning of the 19th century Pericles was "seldom raised to the rank of a model", the 19th century witnessed the emergence of the Periclean image as an undisputed icon of Western democracy. Be that as it may, the account of Periclean leadership given by both Thucydides and Plutarch leave little doubt as to the unusual qualities of the man and the extensive contribution of his personality to the sophisticated political style prevalent in the Athenian *polis* of the Fifth Century BC.

"Was Pericles an all-powerful figure or an evanescent one?" asks Azoulay. His own answer is elaborate, balanced, and erudite, but hardly ground-breaking. Ultimately, Azoulay's work does not propose a new reading of domestic power balances in the Athenian Fifth Century.

As Frank Frost wrote in 1964, a political class of men who aspired to the ideal of the '*kalos k'agathos*' became prominent around Pericles; they were the 'establishment' and, regardless of their personal relations with Pericles, they helped shape and implement Periclean policy. A coalition of men from the great families plus a handful of new men from the merchant class and the army, a coalition typical of Athens in the Fifth Century. On the other hand, demagogues (like Cleon) were men who could not be regarded as '*kalos k'agathos*': as Frost reminded us, they had become rich through the Athenian Empire and being rich they wished to become politically powerful as well. But they discovered that their way to the most influential political positions was discouraged by what must have seemed to them a gentleman's agreement among the great families to preach democracy, but to preserve a regime that prohibited others from exercising real political influence.

As a result, Pericles was attacked by people who considered his towering presence a guarantee for the survival of an elitist form of democracy. To use Frost's words, Pericles was attacked by "a band of pseudo-egalitarians who used the weapons of the agora demagogue – superstitious fear and contempt for intellect – against the ruling elite of Athens". After all, it was an indication of the regime's genuine openness, that Pericles and his friends were never immune from attack, even during the years of his greatest influence. Just before the Peloponnesian War broke out, Pericles and two of his closest associates, his companion, Aspasia, and his friend Pheidias, the renowned sculptor, painter and architect, faced a series of personal, political, and judicial threats.

But the Periclean Age became a model and a magnet. Even if the account of the Athenian regime presented by Thucydides in the monumental Periclean Funeral Oration is clearly idealized, its emphasis on civic commitment combined with a sophisticated concern for free debate, the arts, architecture, and a civilized way of life, offers an almost trans-historic sense of comparison. Then as now, demagogues were quick to capitalize on the weaknesses of democracy; and Pericles – for all his brilliance and statesmanship – proved unable to harness the forces of irrational politics and visceral impulses.

Less detailed than Donald Kagan's impressive *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy* (1991) but also more intellectually detached, Azoulay's work is destined to become a leading text for generations of new scholars of Athenian democracy. If we want to look at the wider picture of Athenian politics in the Fifth Century BC, Geoffrey Hawthorn's new book (*Thucydides on Politics*, 2014) is probably the most original work to study from a political theory perspective. But Azoulay's combination of analysis and detachment, along with his valuable, concise yet substantive exploration of Periclean scholarship of the last few centuries, make his book on Pericles a real pleasure to read.

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